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Fashion blogs: too trendy for libraries or useful resources?

Vivienne Eades

Do your students look at blogs? Do you see them as information sources? Are they part of *your* library's resources? This article summarises some recent research on fashion blogs, both 'amateur' and 'professional', and their use in providing information to fashion students. It highlights the potential usefulness of subject blogs, based on points that arose from the data collected from fashion librarians and students in interviews, an online survey and a round-table discussion. Hopefully the results will encourage you to consider your own stance on blog information in the library, whichever subject you support.

Introduction

Most library literature on blogs is concerned with two things: how libraries can use them as communication or marketing tools for their library, and how librarians are using them as information resources for their own professional knowledge. This is a great start; however, in view of the vast amount of subject-specific information being created, updated and read on a daily basis, it is intriguing to note that there is a gap in the research investigating how our users are using and can use blogs to find the information they are looking for.

Meredith Farkas claims 'The uses of blogs in libraries are almost limitless',¹ yet her book, like most literature pertaining to this subject, fails to address blogs as among the information sources that students will be using for research, or that librarians need to address. The relatively few studies that do investigate the nature of the blog form are cited in this article, in conjunction with the results of interviews with librarians and students, both as part of an online survey and in person. Academic librarians jumped on both Google and Wikipedia as problematic but useful resources which needed to be explored: and one has to wonder, when they share such similar characteristics, why blogs haven't been addressed in the same way.

An OCLC study carried out in 2007 found that an

average of less than 10% of college students were interested in becoming involved in different activities on a social networking page devoted to the library.² We are being very egocentric in focusing simply on one aspect of blogs which *we* see as useful. My question to all librarians is: why are we trying to see what we can do with blogs rather than looking at what students are already doing with them and supporting that? The research I conducted aims to do this, albeit on a small scale, and reviews the implications.

The premise of my study is that, in order to properly understand the use and possible use of blogs as information resources, research should not be broad and non-specific but should include a deep understanding of user needs and behaviour and the nature of the subject-specific blog arena.

I chose fashion as a topic because I had observed the use of blogs amongst fashion students, and also because of the importance of blogs, which is much debated despite their high visibility, within the fashion industry itself. Fashion provided a very different case study to, say, geography: as a degree subject it is both creative and academic, but it is based upon a commercial discourse rather than one which is largely academic, and the students are working towards becoming a part of that specific commercial industry.

Methodology

Qualitative data is an important part of this study, and the initial focus was therefore on in-depth interviews with fashion librarians. However, this was a time-consuming process and, in order to gain a wider range of basic quantitative statistics on fashion blog usage, an online survey of fashion librarians was conducted as well, as was a round table involving fashion students, a librarian and an academic. This was held at an American university as a result of a happy meeting of academic term dates with a travel opportunity for me. The round table format was used because it was a time-effective way of gaining insight from students and academics without undertaking another complete round of individual interviews. While the aim was to observe a discourse on the subject amongst fashion students and librarians, it also gave me the opportunity to include the American point of view.

Current use

Of those 22 fashion librarians who completed the survey online, 54.5% (12) said they look at fashion blogs and 45.5% (10) said they didn't do so at all. 59.1% (13) of librarians surveyed said both fashion students and academics at their institutions consulted fashion blogs and 40.9% (9) were unsure about both usage by either group. No-one claimed that they weren't used, and this suggests that usage of fashion blogs is strong amongst at least the majority of fashion students and academics. On the other hand the large percentage that is unsure about use implies that there is space for librarians to engage further with the non-library information resources students and staff are using.

Twelve librarians answered that both their students and academics consulted blogs, and nine of these look at blogs themselves. The fact that those who are aware of student and staff use of blogs are also engaging with them suggests that their use may be a response to their users' behaviour. A cause and effect relationship cannot be established from this alone, but many gave reasons for looking at blogs that were connected with student behaviour or knowledge.

Additional comments from staff and students as to which blogs were useful revealed that a wide range is being used: commercial, individual 'amateur' and educational, which is in itself a good representation of the fashion blogging sphere. This indicates that a variety of fashion blog content has use within education rather than just one specific

type, for example those written by fashion journalists, or the purely visual *Tumblr* style blogs.

Some respondents commented in the surveys and interviews that many fashion tutors had their own blogs, particularly those who are active in the industry. Four of the librarians interviewed said that academics use blogs for both teaching and assessment.

28.6% (4) of the librarians surveyed are currently linking to blogs or directing students to them in some way. An equal number are not doing so; however 42.9% (6) of these answered that they would like to. So most are doing this or would like to in future.

'Usefulness' of blogs

The results show that students, academics and librarians are engaging with blogs. Use however does not prove 'usefulness', particularly not in education, so I endeavoured to establish particular uses of the fashion blog as an information resource. These uses are inextricably tied to the type of resource: that is the form of the blog, as opposed to books or databases.

The four types of information for which librarians thought blogs were most useful, and for which 80% or more voted, were 'events', 'images', 'information on lesser known/new/non-mainstream designers' and 'visual inspiration'.

Currency/immediacy and trends

The characteristic of blogs that was most frequently mentioned as unique, and which makes them different to other fashion library resources, was the currency and immediacy of the information they offer (five of the six librarians interviewed mentioned it, as did students).

All the librarians stressed that currency was a significant aspect of fashion as a subject. Comments about the usefulness of blogs' currency included phrases such as capturing a 'moment in time'. Obviously this is something a fashion magazine or book can also do, but blogs offer the ability to engage with visual and textual information on the current moment in fashion, as opposed to the retrospective review offered by hard copy resources. Five of the seven librarians spoken to in person compared blogs directly with books and magazines in terms of the time information takes to reach users. Speaking about books, one librarian said, 'I find that the fashion section of our collection is dated instantly'.

This does not imply that the books are not useful; it implies that blogs are *more* useful for *current* fashion information, because of the characteristics of the form. This is the first of many examples as to how understanding and recognition of the form blogs take can result in their successful use as information resources.

Information about trends

Four of the six librarians interviewed mentioned trends as a significant aspect of blogs. Three of those four linked the usefulness of information about trends in blogs to their currency. All the students also mentioned trends, and asserted that it was one of the most useful things about blogs. They had all used them for trend research in classes, and during work placements in industry. The fashion academic concurred that they were used specifically in trend classes. Three of the librarians said that blogs, and the trend information they offer, are particularly useful for fashion courses in Journalism and Marketing.

An interesting parallel also emerged between blogs and expensive commercial trend forecasting resources, to which many libraries supporting fashion subscribe.³ The librarian present at the round table, after listening to students talk about how vital blogs had been for trend information, questioned subscriptions to expensive resources like WGSN and Donnager's: 'Is anyone using them? Or are we all using blogs now?'

One major UK university library has had to stop subscribing to WGSN and the fashion librarian, in an effort to provide similar content from a free resource, has placed a link on the library catalogue to the Fashion156 blog. Given the importance and cost of these prediction services, the potential use of blogs as sources for trend information is definitely something which could be researched further, particularly in the current climate of funding for higher education in the UK.

Industry

Of those librarians surveyed, 15.8% (3) thought fashion blogs were a 'vital part of industry', 63.2% (12) thought they were important to industry but not key, and 21.1% (4) thought they were neither important nor unimportant. 50% of comments received mentioned their view that blogs are becoming, or will become, increasingly important to the fashion industry.

Whether blogs are currently an important part of that industry or not, they do have a significance there. One librarian advised that a lecturer he spoke

to, who works in industry, had claimed that they were 'absolutely vital for people in the industry keeping abreast of current developments'. And a student described how her employers had wanted her to work with blogs specifically because of her age and a knowledge they felt she *would* or *should* have.

The resistance blogs have received from traditional fashion publishing is looked at in full in my thesis;⁴ however, bloggers are now receiving increasing exposure and many are front row at fashion week at the behest of the designer.

Diversity of content

All the librarians and students who responded thought that fashion blogs offered something different to the commercial resources of the glossy editorial magazines which dominate the discipline. One commented 'there's a kind of wider range of stuff going on with blogs than there is in the mainstream magazines'.

Comments about the form offering more 'freedom' from constraints, and for expression, were made by four of the six librarians interviewed. Wikinomics asserts that web 2.0 and its 'infinite shelf space' has brought about a different way of working that encourages democracy of information and ideas.⁵ Here I want to stress the nature of the free-to-set-up, non-peer-reviewed,⁶ personalised voice of a blog, and its value in providing a wider cross section of fashion information.

One of the two top uses of fashion blogs rated by the librarians who completed the survey was 'information on lesser known/new/non-mainstream designers'. This is extremely important for fashion students and is something that is still lacking in major fashion publications.

One of the librarians described blogs as being like 'fanzines', which is interesting because the context of the information created is the same: those interested in the subject disseminating information different to that which is already freely available, in a not-for-profit manner. This produces different content to commercial or academic publishing.

A study by Kimberly Chopin comparing different types of online information found blog content provided the widest range of opinions on a topic.⁷ While this is a small-scale study, it certainly fits in with findings about the 'niche' gaps in information that fashion blogs fill. This is an extremely positive sign for blogs as information resources in the creative sphere, particularly one in which commercial resources dominate.

Interdisciplinary information

Of those librarians surveyed only 53.3% thought blogs were useful for 'links between different kinds of art/design' and 60% thought they were useful for 'links between fashion and textiles and other disciplines'. In the more open interview format a few librarians commented that a lot of fashion blogs post information not only about fashion but also about other disciplines. There was a consensus as to the way fashion students work, in that they are looking for inspiration in a less 'prescribed' way than other students, and the interdisciplinary nature of their subject was touched upon by both staff and students at the round table. One librarian did articulate the link between the provision of this cross-disciplinary information and fashion student behaviour: 'they're using all sorts of areas of the library and get inspiration from different types of material and I think on the whole that's reflected on blogs'. One student said blogs often provided the 'broad spectrum of design' all in one place.

Networking and interactivity

According to Maria Jose Luzon online academic publishing, in contrast with traditional publishing, allows 'development of documents through more dynamic interaction between researchers and through interlinking'.⁸ She here recognises that the linking and tagging inherent to the form is what cultivates a network of information collaborators in blogs.

In terms of interactive content one student mentioned that she found that the comments on blogs can be useful: from a design perspective she can see how things are being perceived. This aspect of blogs echoes the Wikipedia ethos of working, where one person posts something and others add more information or challenge it. The interactivity of the form therefore allows the content to be placed in the context of a diverse range of views.

Another student mentioned how 'bloggers are very connected [...] their drive is not just to get their opinion out there but to start a dialogue with other people'. These 'networks of passing information', as one librarian called them, provide the opportunity for creative people to share ideas and knowledge quickly. Another librarian thought students could really 'focus on the potential for professional connections' because this is not something which is possible in traditional resources.

Images

Obviously a large proportion of the research carried out by fashion design students is visual. When asked

about the way they work, students talked about visual stimuli, mixing images, mood-boards, creating and honing a concept. They emphasised the importance of visual knowledge – fashion, historical and contextual – and acknowledged that research was very important to them. 86.7% (13) of those surveyed thought fashion blogs were useful for 'visual inspiration': because of their subject, they are almost always heavily or predominantly visual, and many have no discussion but are solely image postings.

Librarians pointed out that fashion students are often looking for inspiration and that they are not always sure what they are looking for. One student said she thinks blogs are a good 'starting off point, the beginning images and thought processes'. The advantages of the quick linking and networked nature of blogs could obviously expedite students' visual research and search for inspiration.

Linking and fashion research

The interviews with students and librarians produced complete consensus about one aspect of how fashion students work with information: they are browsers. The same synonyms cropped up in all the interviews with librarians to communicate the way the students search for visual information in a non-linear/logical way: browsing, grazing, magpie-like, and relying upon serendipity.

Some of the librarians were able to make the connection between the students' physical behaviour in the library and how this echoed the clicking, linking, short snaps of information inherent to blog use and hypertext linking. One said 'fashion students are very much like magpies [...] so it seems [blogs are] quite an organic way for them to work I suppose'.

Flicking through lots of different hard copy resources and clicking through blog posts both allow students quick access to a large volume and variety of potentially relevant aesthetic information. The difference with blogs is characterised by some of the things that have already been mentioned: different kinds of information in an interactive and networked format.

Conclusion

If librarians and students recognise that blogs are a major part of the contemporary fashion industry, surely as information professionals we should be providing students with the skills to evaluate and analyse those that they will encounter, and perhaps

author, when they enter the profession. The uses and importance of fashion blogs outlined in this article signal a need for librarians to become involved with blogs as information resources. Many of the potential 'uses' discussed here are directly related to the nature of the blog. Some are a direct product of the 'openness' of a form which is available for exploitation by 'niche markets', two things Bradley refers to as 'key web 2.0 concepts'.⁹

Blogs are delivering different information in different ways: rather than replicating the information that is already available, they fill gaps left by traditional information resources. So perhaps having these as another fashion resource linked to from the library adds to the usefulness of the 'collection' as a whole. We as librarians however need to *allow* them to be useful by treating them correctly, within collections and information literacy work. Hopefully, if you're not already, you'll think about investigating, linking to and supporting these useful resources.

I haven't been able to discuss all aspects of my research within the confines of this short article, and have therefore consciously focused on the possibilities of what blogs can offer our students. A full examination of the limitations and practical implementation of blogs as information resources in libraries is included in my Master's thesis, parts of which I will be happy to supply upon request.

I should also add that the use of blogs as information resources may not be transferable to all subject disciplines. This is undoubtedly something which should be looked into, particularly if students are using them as information resources independent of the library context.

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